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Patrick Kavanagh – A (Non) Romantic Poet

The purpose of the article is to verify in what way the Romantic features of Kavanagh's poetry affected the mood of his verse. According to James Joyce,

in realism you are down to facts on which the world is based: the sudden reality which smashes romanticism into a pulp. What makes most people's lives unhappy is some disappointed romanticism, some unrealizable and misconceived ideal. In fact, you may say that idealism is the ruin of man, and if we lived down to fact, as primitive man had to do, we would be better off. This is what we are made for. Nature is quite unromantic. It is we who put romance into her, which is a false attitude, an egoism, absurd like all egoisms.¹

This statement, which is quoted from Arthur Power's *Conversations with James Joyce*, serves as a point of departure for precisely why Romanticism was stimulating for Patrick Kavanagh, unquestionably a post-Romantic poet. He undoubtedly lived in post-Romantic times. One of the points of this paper is to establish why, in times when Romanticism ceased to be a dominant epoch, a poet might turn to nature and spirituality and consequently might not allow the destruction of "romanticism into a pulp" in his soul. Its main claim is derived from the conviction that a poet's individual process of creating verse occurs not only by means of reasoning and logic, but also through spirituality and imagination. This theory holds that when in the age of reason, logic, and science fail to provide meaning and explain the feelings and emotions that appear in

¹ Arthur Power, *Conversations with James Joyce* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1999), p. 113.

a poet's mind, room is made for imagination, spirituality, and mysticism which might be used as the means of conceiving the definition of the self through poetry. This conception suggests that Kavanagh turned to Romantic ideals as a kind of escape or alternative to the reality that surrounded him in everyday life. By analysing his poems I would like to ascertain what influence Romanticism bore on his literary works and what were the consequences of such a turning to the ideals of the previous epoch. If a poet, while creating verse, reaches for the ideals from the bygone literary period, it definitely changes the character of his poetry; and makes it "alternative". A chief aim of the paper is to ascertain why several Romantic features were revived in Kavanagh's poetry whereas others were generally rejected. It is necessary to explain why the poet decided to choose only certain romantic characteristics – and what exactly featured in those particular characteristics that they were chosen by the author? What pushed a 20th-century poet to the absolute rejection of the ideals of his contemporary epoch and a return to the philosophical doctrines of his ancestors? There appears an inquiry if Kavanagh's vision of the world was consentaneous with Joyce's statement that "primitive man live down do fact" whereas those of deep sensitivity try to "put romance into unromantic nature"? This article is an endeavour to explain the above uncertainties.

Patrick Kavanagh, regarded as one of the leading Irish poets of the 20th century, is an example of an individual who, although enclosed in the circles of literary critics, rejected modern values and managed to create his own, unique poetic personality that was shaped by norms originating in the Romantic Era. In the preface to his *Collected Poems*, Kavanagh presented his Romantic approach to creating verse: "There is, of course, a poetic movement which sees poetry materialistically. The writers of this school see no transcendent nature in the poet; they are practical chaps, excellent technicians. But somehow or other I have a belief in poetry as a mystical thing, and a dangerous thing."² This materialistic "movement" mentioned by Kavanagh surrounded him, and at the same time limited the poet's mind and his sense of freedom. Creating "safe" poetry, aimed at being appreciated by the critics, and did not allow for the wide-ranging development of the poet's imagination. In making such a statement he expressed his contempt for the established norms of the art of poetry and a preference for his own individual way of creating his personal poetic self that satisfied his own needs, not that of those around him. Therefore, Kavanagh chose to write "dangerous" poetry; therefore, he risked that his literary output might not be valued by the reviewers, that

² Patrick Kavanagh, *Collected Poems* (London: The Norton Library, 1973), p. xiii.

it would probably be neglected or marginalised. He seemed consciously to resign from the commercial and materialistic aspect of his literary works and decided to create mystical, spiritual poetry aimed at being art, not a “product.” This preface to the *Collected Poems* was a kind of poetic manifesto, where he presented his approach to creating poetry and as such may be compared to William Wordsworth’s “Preface to Lyrical Ballads” published in 1801, that is also named the “manifesto” of English Romantic criticism. In Wordsworth’s essay, the poet called his poetry “experimental,” innovative, and different from the surrounded canons. In this respect, Kavanagh’s and Wordsworth’s attitudes to creating verse are thus similar.

Since his poetry is rooted in Inniskeen, the place of Kavanagh’s birth and residence, he could not depict its beauty and mysticism without reaching for the Romantic legacy of his ancestors. He was a poet who searched for a personal identity through creating verse and defined his individuality through his poetic self. His autobiographical books confirm that Kavanagh’s identity was shaped by the poetry he had created. Because of his deep conviction that he had a mission that had to be fulfilled in society, poetry was his tool to achieve this, allowing him to convey his views and opinions. That is the reason why his poetry had nothing in common with “self-fashioning,” a term introduced by Stephen Greenblatt³ meaning the process of constructing one’s identity according to a set of socially acceptable standards. Kavanagh reflected his unique personality in his poems. He was not concerned about any of the widely accepted regulations. He did not consider himself to be an artist in the sense of a man who is appreciated by critics and public opinion. In the poem “Portrait of the Artist” Kavanagh summarized his life and his attitude to poetry:

I never lived, I have no history,
I deserted no wife to take another,
I rooted in a room and leave – this message.⁴

In this poem Kavanagh clearly defined his intention to convey his beliefs and ideas. He did not connect being an artist with fame, splendour, or leading a life full of escapades and controversial adventures. He found his identity in creating verse, in a conviction that he was able to influence the world that surrounded him, to induce it to be more spiritual, to add romantic mysticism and magic to it.

³ Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning. From More To Shakespeare* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005)

⁴ Kavanagh, *Collected Poems*, p. 121.

In the poem “Dreamer” the speaker summoned the unique value of the dream – a concept so popular among the Romantic writers. It is a kind of dialogue between the sensitive speaker and the rational “she.” A woman accused the speaker of being unreasonable and irrational:

‘A FOOL you are,’ she said,
 ‘Weaving dreams of blue
 Deceiving sky. Evening folds them all
 And what are you?’⁵

The woman stated that it is futile to be a dreamer, to devote life to analysing dreams and mystical nature. She could not perceive any deeper sense in the dream due to her profound conviction that one should find aim for a life grounded on logic and reason. According to her, nature is entirely unromantic, and fashioning it to be artistic is beyond any deeper sense. The speaker replies:

‘And why should I,’ I answered,
 ‘Walk among the dead?
 And you are dead a million years,
 The wolves are fed.’⁶

The speaker compared the woman’s vision of the world to being dead. For him, sensitivity and the ability to perceive the hidden, mystical matters was of such value that it is synonymous to being alive. He was aware of the fact that life is too short to commit one’s energies to the prosaic issues, as the commonly accepted wisdom is not able to replace the value of dreaming and mystical existence that may last much longer than any earthly existence:

A fool who eats the leavings of the Wise,
 Who tells me that he dies?⁷

The poem is filled with a Romantic vision of the world connected with the exceptional value of dreams and mystical experiences. Thanks to these features the speaker was able to present his rejection of the contemporary visions of the world – they are presented as the views of a “she.” By mentioning these sentimental issues, the speaker not

⁵ Kavanagh, *Collected Poems*, p. 10.

⁶ Kavanagh, *Collected Poems*, p. 10.

⁷ Kavanagh, *Collected Poems*, p. 10.

only revealed his rejection of the recent understanding, but he also acknowledged that his views and opinions were not accepted by his current fellows. This poem presents the idea that the speaker could not identify himself with the rational reality and poetry was for him “a tool” to embody Joyce’s “unrealizable or misconceived ideal.” The choice of the motive of a dream is here not incidental, as the dream and its deeper meaning have always stood in opposition to realism and rationality. One may interpret this poem as the speaker’s declaration, the willingness to announce his distinctness from the all encompassing realism.

Kavanagh claimed that his works are best read without any comments from scholars. At the very beginning of his preface to the *Collected Poems* he stated: “I have never been much considered by the English critics.”⁸ Rejecting wisdom, commonly accepted knowledge, truths and scientific achievements is another characteristic of the romantic vision of life. This attitude is visible both in the “Dreamer” and yet more intense in the poem “The Intangible” from the *Collected Poems*. The speaker depicted here the mystical features of the country landscape:

RAPT to starriness – not quite
I go through fields and fens of night,
The nameless, the void
Where ghostly poplars whisper to
A silent countryside.⁹

In this excerpt the speaker was walking at night and observing the mysteriousness of the dark. The charm of nature is here represented through its inexpressibility. Everything that is settled and defined turns out to be trivial, beyond any regard. Only the inscrutable, the undefined is of principal value. The speaker praised the rural landscape and people. He believed in the unique wisdom of the uneducated, simultaneously denying technological and scientific development and the value of commonly accepted ancient knowledge:

Splendours of Greek,
Egypt’s cloud-woven glory
Speak no more, speak
Speak no more
A thread-worn story.¹⁰

⁸ Kavanagh, *Collected Poems*, p. xiii.

⁹ Kavanagh, *Collected Poems*, p. 6.

¹⁰ Kavanagh, *Collected Poems*, p. 6.

Kavanagh himself identified his poetry as dangerous because he was aware of the fact that rejecting commonly accepted truths probably would not be approved by the critics. Being conscious of this risk, he established his own, unique mode of creating. For the poet, the commercial character of poetry excludes its artistic value.

Robert F. Garrat describes this mode as the style of a “young bard”: “These early pieces are vague, romantic impressions of nature, the kind of poetry we might expect from the dreamy youth with literary aspirations. The lines compound visions and drown in emotional intensity, despite their insistence upon distance.”¹¹ Garrat emphasizes the clumsiness of this verse; however it does not conceal the enormous affection that the speaker conveys to the reader. The “young bard” decides to choose an audacious poetic manner – to define previous human achievements – as “a thread-worn story” and to turn to the mystical and supernatural. The poem “Indian Vision and Thunder”¹² is of unique significance for the speaker, being contrary to scientific and technological accomplishments.

Kavanagh rejected the conventional literary criticism that was prevalent among 20th-century writers and poets. He managed to turn to his advantage the fact that he was not appreciated either by his countrymen or by professional literary critics in Dublin. In the poet’s autobiography *The Green Fool* he traced his troubles as a young bard poet who is forced to face living among practical farmers in the Irish countryside: “People didn’t want a poet, but a fool, yes they could be doing with one of these. And as I grew up not exactly ‘like another’ I was installed the fool.”¹³ And he continued: “Being made a fool is good for the soul. It produces a sensitivity of one kind or other; it makes a man into something unusual, a saint or a poet or an imbecile.”¹⁴ In this passage Kavanagh admitted that he had come to terms with the above-mentioned circumstances, to such a degree that he managed to turn them into an advantage: “Kavanagh cultivated and perpetuated the role of outsider so that he might take certain liberties as a ‘character’, a Dublin word for eccentric.”¹⁵ He began to seek isolation, as it enabled him to fully develop his poetic artistry. He frequently emphasized his “otherness” from the contemporary poets in his verse. In the poem “Inniskeen Road: July Evening” the speaker stated:

¹¹ Robert F. Garrat, *Modern Irish Poetry* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), p. 139.

¹² Kavanagh, *Collected Poems*, p. 6.

¹³ Patrick Kavanagh, *The Green Fool* (London: Penguin Books, 1975), p. 10.

¹⁴ Kavanagh, *The Green Fool*, p. 10.

¹⁵ Garrat, *Modern Irish Poetry*, p. 139.

I have what every poet hates in spite
 Of the solemn talk of contemplation.
 Oh, Alexander Selkirk knew the plight
 Of being king of government and nation.
 A road, a mile of kingdom, I am a king
 Of banks and stones and every blooming thing.¹⁶

Kavanagh followed here the Romantic legacy of his ancestors. The speaker defined what it meant for him to be a poet – abstract, high-minded subjects were for him of diminutive value in the process of creating verse. He mentioned Aleksander Selkirk, a Scottish sailor who spent four years as an outcast when he was abandoned on an uninhabited island. He was forced to perform all possible functions on the island – despite huge difficulties he managed to survive. The speaker in the poem esteemed Selkirk; nevertheless, he was not interested in achieving such exalted goals. For him minor matters, and ordinary details were of exceptional value. The poet appreciated these details after observing and contemplating nature in solitude and isolation. Kavanagh himself described his attitude to the principal and insignificant subjects in his poetry in an autobiographical book *Self Portrait* from 1964: “Stupid poets and artists think that by taking subjects of public importance it will help their work to survive. There is nothing as dead and as dammed as an important thing. The things that really matter are casual, insignificant little things.”¹⁷ This strategy is visible not only in the poem “Inniskeen Road: July Evening” but also in the entire poetic verse created by Kavanagh. The idea of isolation, of creating in solitude as the only way to achieve inspiration to produce a valuable literary work has its roots in Romanticism. Also turning to the apparently unessential details, paying attention to all, even the smallest components of nature, intentionally or unconsciously, is what Kavanagh took from his Romantic ancestors.

In his poetry, Kavanagh turns to the holy, the mystical and the spiritual. The mystical imagination of his work is acknowledged by Una Agnew who states that “In his early work he is almost intoxicated by vision.”¹⁸ His autobiography *The Green Fool* portrays him as a young bard who possesses a gift of vision and imagery. According to him, the ability to create poetry is a unique talent given from God and worshipped by the poet: “The gods of poetry are generous: they give every young poet

¹⁶ Kavanagh, *Collected Poems*, p. 19.

¹⁷ Patrick Kavanagh, *Self Portrait* (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1964), p. 20.

¹⁸ Una Agnew, *The Mystical Imagination of Patrick Kavanagh* (Dublin: The Columba Press, 1999), p. 30.

a year's salary which he hasn't worked for; they let him take one peep into every tabernacle; they give him transcendent power at the start and ever after he must make his own magic. While he is learning the craft of verse and getting ready his tools they present him with wonderful lines which he thinks are his own."¹⁹ Then he continued: "In those days I had a vision."²⁰ Kavanagh's world is magical and mystical. He rejected pragmatic truths and common scientific knowledge; the only thing that seems to matter is insight, the hidden. This approach is visible in his poem "Dark Ireland":

We are a dark people
Our eyes are ever turned
Inward
Watching the liar who twists
The hill-paths awry.²¹

Ironically, in this poem the speaker exemplified himself and others of a profound sensitivity as "dark people." He claimed that their lives become much more complicated as the paths they had chosen go askew. This poem and the section from Kavanagh's autobiography mentioned above indicate that the poet's approach to creating verse is thus ambivalent. On one hand, he treated his talent as a gift from God, a kind of blessing; on the other, he admitted that choosing this path in life is off-centre, complex, and filled with plenty of exertions. A poet is able to perceive matters that are invisible to ordinary people and this unique sensibility frequently leads him to suffering. In the poem "To a Child" the speaker was aware of the gloominess and perils of the way of life he had chosen and he admonished a child from leading this kind of life:

Child do not go
Into the dark places of soul,
For there the grey wolves whine,
The lean grey wolves.²²

Here the speaker once more referred to Romanticism – an epoch in which the child is a symbol of innocence, the purity and clarity of mind. In this poem the child was presented in a typically romantic way – its mind and soul are guiltless and uncontaminated by the pragmatism of the

¹⁹ Kavanagh, *The Green Fool*, pp. 200–201.

²⁰ Kavanagh, *The Green Fool*, p. 201.

²¹ Kavanagh, *Collected Poems*, p. 9.

²² Kavanagh, *Collected Poems*, p. 9.

modern world. For the speaker, entering these “dark places of the soul” meant perceiving only guilt, sinfulness, and danger which is symbolised by the wolves. In the next part of the poem the speaker gave the child hope to preserve the primary beauty of life:

Child there is a light somewhere
Under a star,
Sometime it will be for you
A window that looks
Inward to God.²³

In these lines the speaker turned to God as the only possible “saviour” of the child. In God he perceived the only path that a child might choose not to lose its natural innocence and the original blessedness of human existence. In Kavanagh’s poetry, romantic ideals are combined with the Christian Faith. God is not a distant and abstract idea, but he truly exists among people. He is present in everything he has created – in the fields, flowers and all the elements of nature, he also takes special care of children as the symbolised innocence and hope for “salvation” from the modern, dark world – “The Maiden of Spring is with child By the Holy Ghost.”²⁴ As a consequence, there appears no chasm any more between God and man. God is presented as the guardian and defender of humanity, he is close to people through his presence in all the elements of nature. This perspective is very close to the romantic ideals of praising nature, giving it a unique and mystical role in people’s faith. This bond between God, nature and people is visible in the poem “The Long Garden”:

It was the garden of the golden apples,
A long garden between a railway and a road,
In the sow’s rooting where the hen scratches
We dipped our fingers in the pockets of God.²⁵

In Kavanagh’s poetry, the speaker frequently possesses the ability to alter trivial objects and places into magical, to attribute them with uncommon features. Here an ordinary garden and a farm are transformed into a paradise where miracles happen – “garden of the golden apples.” In the last line the speaker emphasized God’s presence and the contact between God and the people who are in the garden. This poem combines

²³ Kavanagh, *Collected Poems*, p. 9.

²⁴ Kavanagh, *Collected Poems*, p. 18.

²⁵ Kavanagh, *Collected Poems*, p. 74.

God's closeness with the mysticism and magic of nature. Nature is presented as God's creation, full of mysticism and spirituality:

And when the sun went down into Drumcatton
 And the New Moon by its little finger swung
 From the telegraph wires, we knew how God had happened
 And what the blackbird in the whitehorn sang.²⁶

God and his deep faith in Him allow the speaker to understand nature, to become acquainted with its concealed powers. God, here, is presented as nature's great creator who initiates his faithful believers into a magical and mystical world which is not worn or pedestrian any more. As O'Neil has it, "Kavanagh's God is both object and agent of perception, just as 'the flowering of our catharsis' is a subjective state that precedes discovery of the significance possessed by 'raving flowers'."²⁷ The speaker is blessed with a special gift, "he feels he had, at this moment, an insight into God and God's earthly revelation."²⁸ Here, there is confirmation of what Kavanagh wrote in his biography about God, who gave the poet the special power to detect and conceptualize the world's mysticism and magic, and depicted it in the words of the poem:

In the thistly hedge old boots were flying sandals
 By which we travelled through the childhood skies,
 Old buckets rusty-holed with half-hung handles
 Were drums to play when old men married wives.²⁹

Here the reader may easily notice the speaker's ability to alter the ordinary, pragmatic world into a richly imagined extraordinary world. This is a child's attribute, the alteration of the usual objects into magical artifacts. It is a feature that had its origins in romanticism where the object perceived was not important – unlike the things imagined. The romantic vision of a child as an individual of primeval innocence is thus evoked here. The artist is presented as a creative person who manages to maintain some characteristics from childhood, a person for whom the Earth is a holy place, whose soul is not destroyed by the pragmatism, industrialization, and technology of modern life. Una Agnew states that

²⁶ Kavanagh, *Collected Poems*, p. 74.

²⁷ Michael O'Neil, *The All-Sustaining Air. Romantic Legacies and Renewals in British, American and Irish Poetry since 1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 124.

²⁸ Agnew, *The Mystical Imagination of Patrick Kavanagh*, p. 29.

²⁹ Kavanagh, *Collected Poems*, p. 74.

“Kavanagh’s poetry is the principal vehicle of his spirituality.”³⁰ It is the speaker’s spirit reflected in the poem that eliminates the boundaries between the magical world of a child and the rational reality of adults.

The land in which Kavanagh was born, Inniskeen, influenced and transformed his spirit. One may thus claim that his life was a kind of mystical journey and his poems are the consequences of his unique, mystical voyage. The poet’s spiritual longing to uncover the world’s principles appears in the poem “Blind Dog”:

I follow the blind dog,
Crying to my star: O star
Of a passionate pagan’s desire,
Lead me to the truths that are.³¹

In this passage the speaker’s inclination to conceptualize the fundamental laws of nature is visible, however, not the rules of natural sciences or historical truths, but the concepts that may be read from the stars. Such concepts have their origin in romanticism, where elements of nature, not scientific concepts, lead people’s souls on their earthly paths.

In Kavanagh’s poetry paganism and Christianity frequently intermingle – a fascination with the Christian faith is to be observed alongside a praising of pagan mysticism. His deep belief that his role as a poet is to discover the world’s truths led him to turning to contrary paths to achieve his goal. In Kavanagh’s voyage, the sense of a mission for the poet in society is easily noticed. Kavanagh claimed that his unique role as a poet was to protect society from the dangers of materialism and the cruelty of life. For him these representations of depravity were a kind of “fog” that must be removed from people’s minds so that they might be purified. This vision he shared with the neo-Romantic Irish poet William Butler Yeats and with one of the chief representatives of English Romanticism, William Blake. In his poetry, Kavanagh frequently appeals to the Christian faith to emphasize his sense of a mission. For him, the poet is a theologian and his role is a kind of calling, whose purpose is to convey Christian ideas to society:

To your high altar I once came
Proudly, even brazenly, and I said:
Open your tabernacles I too am flame
Ablaze on the hills of Being.³²

³⁰ Agnew, *The Mystical Imagination of Patrick Kavanagh*, p. 11.

³¹ Kavanagh, *Collected Poems* (London: The Norton Library, 1973), p. 17.

³² Kavanagh, *Collected Poems*, p. 12.

These lines echo other parts of Kavanagh's poetry where the speaker appeals to God and to the Christian Faith and which testifies to the fact that the poet was sceptical about the typically romantic attitude to the religion. In Romanticism natural religion prevailed with the conviction that a man has something divine in him. As reason ceased to limit the imagination, traditional Christianity was no longer able to explain the universe that was inside man's soul: "as an object of desire shifts from a perishable person to an immortal God, the value of all that is transient suffers."³³ In his poetry, Kavanagh rejected this Romantic characteristic, while in presenting huge respect for God, and for the conventional Christianity. He describes himself as a humble man who was endowed by God with a special and unique gift – a talent to create poetry. Kavanagh's humbleness did not allow him to identify himself as a God-like creature, so he could not accept the Romantic canons in the field of religion and God. This poem is summoned in this part to prove that Patrick Kavanagh was inspired by the Romantic Era, but he did not repeat all Romantic ideals and canons unconsciously. He shaped his poetry in such an unusual way that he managed to choose the aspects from the Romantic epoch that suited his poetic personality and reject others.

In Kavanagh's poetry there are numerous attempts to find God, to verify his presence in human souls to be noticed. One of these theories is presented in the poem "God in Woman":

Surely my God is feminine, for Heaven
Is the generous impulse, is contented
With feeding praise to the good. And all
Of these that I have known have come from women.³⁴

This is a highly unorthodox theology created by Kavanagh. In this poem the poet approximated to the romantic theory of a woman being an ideal creature close to a Goddess, and possessing divine features. However, the speaker did not praise the women's physical features but he appreciated the attributes of their personality. He found divinity in women's souls and claimed that all positive qualities that may influence and improve the modern world have their origins in women's spirit. The uncommon attitude to religion is to be found in the literary output of one of the Kavanagh's romantic precursors, William Blake, who described

³³ Jonathan Strauss, "The Poetry of Loss: Lamartine, Musset and Nerval," in: *A Companion to European Romanticism*, ed. Michael Ferber (Cornwall: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), p. 195.

³⁴ Kavanagh, *Collected Poems*, p. 147.

his revolutionary beliefs concerning religion in his book *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. It is a series of texts written in imitation of biblical prophecy. In this book, Blake demonstrated his own doctrine of God and religion, his belief in liberty, equality in society and between the sexes. The word “God” appears frequently in Kavanagh’s verse. “Kavanagh repeats the word, not with the anxiety that drives Keats to repeat ‘happy’ in the third stanza of ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’, but with a renewed awareness of the ‘profoundest’ meaning of the word: a meaning which for Kavanagh has to do with the fact that beauty inheres in the local, in ‘a cutaway bog’, and irradiates the lives of ‘local farmers’.”³⁵ This rural, peasant life of “local farmers” is a prevailing theme in Kavanagh’s verse. The poet never concealed his peasant origins. In *The Green Fool* he describes his parents with respect but admits that they were not educated people, although he appreciates their virtues: “My father was a shoemaker in the good days when a pair of shop boots were an insult to any decent man’s feet. He was a small, lively, intelligent man and had among people a reputation for learning almost as great as the schoolmaster.”³⁶ Kavanagh in a similar way traces his mother: “My mother was a simple peasant woman, twenty years younger than father. She was without any schooling but was very shrewd, a good judge of men and animals, and the best measurer of unknown quantities I have ever known.”³⁷ These brief descriptions show evidence that the poet’s parents were wise and intelligent people, although they did not obtain any formal education. They managed to raise a son of profound sensibility, a great poet whose verse is filled with issues rooted in his mother country, who extolled Inniskeen and its charms to all of Ireland. Kavanagh deeply regarded his parents and claims that the characteristics he inherited and the values they conveyed to him turned out to be useful and helpful in his later life: “From my father I have inherited the spirit, from my mother the material garment of wisdom.”³⁸

Kavanagh’s numerous poems are rooted in the rural townland of Inniskeen, the place of his birth and adolescence. Here, the poet’s fascination with the romantic ideals originated in perceiving the magnificence, purity and romantic sorcery of nature: “I saw into a far mysterious place that I long associated with Wordsworth’s Ode on Immortality. I believed for many years that I had looked back into the world

³⁵ O’Neil, *The All-Sustaining Air. Romantic Legacies and Renewals in British, American and Irish Poetry since 1900*, p. 128.

³⁶ Kavanagh, *The Green Fool*, p. 11.

³⁷ Kavanagh, *The Green Fool*, p. 12.

³⁸ Kavanagh, *The Green Fool*, p. 12.

from whence I came. And perhaps I had.”³⁹ One may boldly claim that Kavanagh found the ideals derived from the Romantic Era in Inniskeen. He was enchanted with the natural beauty of his homeland; although frequently misunderstood and underappreciated, he took inspiration from rural people and their lifestyle. Although the poet himself suffered as he was constantly reminded of his rustic background and poor education, he depicted and celebrated the beauty and simplicity of rural Ireland in his verse.

In the poem “The Great Hunger” published in 1942, the speaker describes the struggle of the farmer Patrick Maguire to emotionally survive in the monotonous routine of rural Ireland. “The force of this poem does not come simply from the realistic description of potato and turnip farming, though the harshness of that life is vividly portrayed. It comes, rather, from the story of Maguire himself, whose great hunger is spiritual, intellectual and sexual.”⁴⁰ In this long poem (756 lines) the speaker depicted certain characteristics of rural life, its severity and simplicity:

The peasant has no worries;
In his little lyrical fields,
He ploughs and sows;
He eats fresh food,
He loves fresh women,
He is his own master
As it was in the Beginning
The simpleness of peasant life.⁴¹

These lines are thus ironical, as the speaker described the peasant life in an idyllic mode, though in other parts of the poem there are numerous depictions of the life of a farmer that is filled with hard work and routine. This “simpleness” turns out to be a curse for an individual whose desire is to lead a life full of adventure, who is a man of deep sensitivity and is not able to emotionally bear the plainness of a peasant life. The protagonist is aware of his helplessness, of the fact that his home is his prison.

I remember a night we walked
Through the moon of Donaghmoyne,
Four of us seeking adventure,

³⁹ Kavanagh, *The Green Fool*, p. 13.

⁴⁰ Garrat, *Modern Irish Poetry*, p. 150.

⁴¹ Kavanagh, *Collected Poems*, p. 52.

It was midsummer forty years ago.
Now I know
The moment that gave the turn to my life.
O Christ! I am locked in a stable with pigs and cows forever.⁴²
'Is there nothing he can do?
Is there no escape?
No escape, no escape.⁴³

In these passages there is a portrait of a man who is imprisoned in a time and place that causes huge suffering. The lack of any possibility to develop his imagination or be educated creates a trap from which the protagonist has no escape, nor sees any escape. He waited for the moment that could change his life, which unfortunately never comes. The poem describes the personal tragedy of a sensitive man whose life conditions impede his mental and emotional development. From a romantic point of view, this poem turns out to be ambivalent. Admittedly one of the elements of the Romantic Era was the great dissatisfaction with the present and with ordinary life, but artists found a way to overcome this melancholia; they created other worlds in their imagination where they could realize their own true self. In the poem "The Great Hunger" Kavanagh rejects this approach. He chose naturalistic descriptions of the harsh reality of the elements of rural existence such as rusty ploughs, ditches and broken buckets. On the other hand, the romantic hero is depicted in a struggle for personal freedom against destiny and society. In such a context, one may boldly name Maguire a romantic hero. In this poem the speaker manages to combine Romantic ideas with a thesis from his contemporary epoch. Kavanagh, in this poem, presents enormous poetic artistry, he does not limit his verse to one established canon, but uses various, frequently contrasting approaches to convey his ideas. This is an example of Kavanagh's poem, where there is a combination of various approaches to be noticed. It is done in a very keen and well-thought out way, so that when reading this poem, there appears no inconsistencies.

After analysing the Romantic features adopted by Patrick Kavanagh, it is possible to conclude that he borrowed certain characteristics from the Romantic period that were valuable for him, whereas others were rejected. Kavanagh's place of birth and residence were central to his individuality, and his native home and its natural environs were a constant source of new inspiration. He used the Romantic vision of nature as something holy and spiritual, as it was impossible for him to depict the charm

⁴² Kavanagh, *Collected Poems*, pp. 51–52.

⁴³ Kavanagh, *Collected Poems*, p. 53.

and magnificence of those places by using only contemporary poetic devices.

And yet his humbleness and regard for religion and the Christian faith did not allow him to accept the Romantic theory of a God-like portrait of man as an artist. In *The Green Fool* Kavanagh states: "I was not a literary man. Poetry is not literature: poetry is the breath of young life and the cry of elemental beings: literature is a cold ghost-wind blowing through Death's dark chapel. I turned from the door of Literature and continued my work among poetry, potatoes and old boots."⁴⁴

Kavanagh rejected conventional literary criticism, claiming that poetry is the only tool to depict emotions and passions and to perceive the world accurately. He suggested that poetry, and indeed life, cannot be interpreted in one established way and consented to the Romantic belief that all conventional norms should be eliminated. Kavanagh used all these devices to create his unique poetic self, as his sense of mission in society, his turning to the holy and spiritual in nature did not correspond to contemporary literary trends and movements. According to Garrat, "Kavanagh provided an important new strategy for modern Irish poetry which stirred the imagination of yet another generation of poets."⁴⁵ He was a man living in the 20th century, yet his soul and poetic identity could not fully integrate with prevailing norms. This is the major reason why Kavanagh reached for and exploited the Romantic legacy and yet he rejected certain aspects of it. When analysing his poetry, the influence of his Romantic ancestors is evident, nevertheless Kavanagh managed to maintain his poetic personality, not to close his verse in one established canon but to consciously select from the Romantic Era those characteristics that conformed to his mode of creativity.

⁴⁴ Kavanagh, *The Green Fool*, p. 203.

⁴⁵ Garrat, *Modern Irish Poetry*, p. 166.

Ewa Mazur-Wyganowska

Patrick Kavanagh – poeta (nie)romantyczny

Streszczenie

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest opisanie romantycznych cech w poezji Patricka Kavanagha oraz ustalenie, w jaki sposób owe cechy ukształtowały jego styl tworzenia dzieł literackich. Kiedy w dobie rozsądku i logiki nauka nie jest w stanie wyjaśnić wszystkich wątpliwości pojawiających się w umyśle poety, powstaje przestrzeń, którą wypełnia on na powrót wyobraźnią, duchowością i mistycyzmem, definiując w ten sposób swoje poetyc-

kie ja. Zwrócenie się Kavanagha ku romantycznym ideałom było ucieczką bądź alternatywą w stosunku do otaczającej go rzeczywistości. Przez analizę wierszy Kavanagha autorka eseju próbuje ustalić, jaki wpływ miał romantyzm na wiersze poety, a także dlaczego niektóre cechy tej epoki zostały wskrzeszone w jego poezji, podczas gdy inne zostały odrzucone. Co sprawiło, że XX-wieczny poeta wyrzeka się współczesnych ideałów i zwraca się ku swoim przodkom? Artykuł ten jest próbą odpowiedzi na te pytania.

Ewa Mazur-Wyganowska

Patrick Kavanagh – ein (un) romantischer Dichter

Zusammenfassung

In dem Essay setzt sich die Verfasserin zum Ziel, die romantischen Eigenschaften der Dichtung von Patrick Kavanagh zu schildern und zu zeigen, auf welche Weise sie den literarischen Stil des Autors beeinflusst haben. Wenn die Wissenschaft im Zeitalter der Vernunft und Logik nicht im Stande ist, alle im Geiste des Dichters erscheinenden Zweifel zu erklären, entsteht ein Raum, den der Dichter wieder mit Phantasie, Geistigkeit und Mystizismus füllt und so sein lyrisches Ich definiert. Kavanagh wendet sich den romantischen Idealen zu, um von der Wirklichkeit zu fliehen oder eine Alternative für die Wirklichkeit zu finden. Die Analyse der Kavanaghs Gedichte hilft der Verfasserin zu ergründen, welchen Einfluss die Romantik auf poetische Werke des Dichters ausgeübt hat, und warum einige Merkmale der Epoche in seinen Werken wiederbelebt und andere abgelehnt wurden. Was verursachte, dass der Dichter aus dem 20. Jahrhundert auf zeitgenössische Ideale verzichtete und sich seinen Vorfahren wandte? Das vorliegende Essay sollte alle diese Fragen beantworten.